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AUTHOR Steinmiller, Georgine; Steinmiller, Robert
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ABSTRACT

Youth Opportunities Unlimited is a summer residential program for Arkansas high school students at risk of dropping out of school. During 1989-91, 517 14- and 15-year-old students completed the program, which consisted of two academic classes, a job skills class, and paid employment during 60 days residence on a university campus. Additional support services included health and dental care, counseling, and recreation. A follow-up component involved regular monthly contact with each participant; exit interviews; interviews with family and counselor; data collection on grades, attendance, and graduation; and an annual retreat for all former participants. A personality questionnaire was completed before and after the program and at annual retreats. Maintenance of monthly contact was very successful, and in many cases, became a lifeline for students. The program lost contact with only 10 students. Of the 507 contacts maintained, 19 students graduated, 5 received GEDs, 456 are still in school, 2 died, and 25 are not in school. There were no significant changes in grades or attendance. Self-esteem and attitudes improved as a result of the program and remained positive over time. (SV)

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Georgine Steinmiller, Ph.D.
Henderson State University

Robert Steinmiller, Ph.D
Henderson State University

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YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES UNLIMITED: THE RESULTS OF A THREE YEAR STUDY

I. Introduction

Need: Drop-out Prevention

To insure the future of the world, we will need to depend on the education and training of our youth. The need for a well educated population can not be underestimated. Because we are such a technological and complicated society, we need the very best educated youth possible. Keeping our children in school to obtain this education is vital. Programs that encourage students to stay in school should have a high priority endorsement nationally.

Drop-outs represent a loss of human potential and productivity which translates into a very high income cost to our society (Hamby, 1989). Current statistics show that approximately one in four students drop out of school without graduating (Kunisawa, 1988). Today's society puts limits on those individuals who lack a formal education. Historically the minimum of a high school diploma was not required for good employment, but it is today. High school dropouts today suffer more difficulty than ever before in obtaining good vocational opportunities (Brief Guidelines on Information and Strategy for Dropout Prevention in West Virginia, 1984).

Dropout prevention is a good investment, especiallywhen considering the alternative. Many dropouts do not participate productively in the work force and are often considered a burden on society (Gabriel and Anderson, 1987). High dropout rates cost society in such forms as increased crime rates, higher prison cost, an overworked welfare system, and greater economic loss to the nation. Experts maintain the importance of education to help a person become a productive citizen.

We must view the problem in terms of prevention. Potential dropouts have not yet dropped out of school, so the problem may be addressed for some persons by intervention strategies. The use of positive intervention strategies should reduce the high dropout rate. This report shares information about a research study relating to one such intervention approach.

Program: Overview of Youth Opportunities Unlimited

Youth Opportunities Unlimited (Y.O.U.) started in Texas with a successful migrant worker education program. In 1988, Arkansas decided to pursue the Y.O.U. program to help reduce its high school dropout rate. On June 15, 1988, Arkansas implemented its first summer residential Y.O.U. program for high school students who have been designated as at-risk of dropping out of school.

These first efforts of Henderson State University and the

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Arkansas Department of Education marked the beginning of the Youth Opportunities Unlimited Program in Arkansas. In 1989, Henderson hosted a second program, with the addition of three more programs at three other Arkansas universities: Arkansas State University, Southern Arkansas University in Magnolia, and University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. In 1990, a program at the University of the Ozarks was added. In 1991, The University of the Ozarks could not participate in the Y.O.U. program due to a lack of sufficient summer jobs on the campus; however, the University of Arkansas at Monticello was added to the group.

The Y.O.U. participants were identified by their schoolcounselors as "at risk" for dropping out, using factors suchas low family income, families who have not completed high school, families who have not placed a substantial value on education, a lack of interest in school, increased mobility, etc, (Gabriel & Anderson, 1987; Steinmiller & Steinmiller, 1990). These students were further screened and selected to participate in Y.O.U. program by representatives from the Service Delivery Areas (SDA). The SDA's are responsible for the allocation of funds from the Federal Jobs Training Partnership Act (JTPA). Primary funding for Y.O.U. comes from the Vocational and Technical Educational Division of the Arkansas Department of Education. In 1988 the cost for each student was $3,150 (Y.O.U. fact sheet, June 1988). In 1989, this rate was increased to $3,250 per student.

Each Arkansas Y.O.U. program gives 14 and 15 year -old students across the state the opportunity to master basic skills in language arts and mathematics. They also participate in quality work experience during their "intensive" sixty-day residential program on the various universities' campuses (Henderson State University Press Release June 14, 1988).

The academic component of the Y.O.U. program consists of two academic classes and a job skills class. The academic classes are approximately one hour and forty-five minutes and are taught in the morning and afternoon; the job skills class is one hour. The academic classes are taught by Arkansas certified public school teachers. The students are divided into morning and afternoon groups, so that they can attend classes for one half of the day and work the remaining half. This program also enables the students to earn 1/2 credit of elective course work in English, math, or reading which can be counted on their school transcripts toward graduation requirements.

The students are paid for working at specific job sites on the university campus. Most students are able to take home between $600-$700.00 for their endeavors. This amount varies depending on how much they spend of their weekly allowance during the program. The students learn budgeting skills in the job skills class.

Besides the education and work training aspects of Y.O.U. program, a wide range of support services are available to the students. These services include a health care component (physical and dental), a counseling component, and a recreational component. For some students the Y.O.U. program offers them their first chance to have a dental or physical exam.

The Y.O.U. program is a very comprehensive program that takes into consideration the whole child. Information about the Y.O.U. program, is available from the Y.O.U. Supervisor, Exemplary Programs, Vocational and Technical Division, Luther S. Hardin Building, Little Rock, AR 72201-1083.

Study: Overview of Youth Opportunities Unlimited Follow-up

The Follow-up component of the Y.O.U. program was implemented at the inception of Arkansas's Y.O.U. endeavor, because the program leaders had the foresight to realize accountability is essential to any program. Efforts were made to gain funds to "follow-up" the Y.O.U. students. Through the Carl Perkins Vocational Educational Act grant funds, the Y.O.U. Follow-up component became a reality.

The primary objective of the Follow-up was to determine whether the students who completed the Y.O.U. programs would graduate from high school. To accomplish this objective, it was essential that a monthly contact be maintained with each student. Because this type of student is often very transient, less than a monthly contact would have increased the number of students lost. We wanted to be sure we could account for as many students as possible who completed the Y.O.U. program.

The secondary objectives established for this project included: 1. maintain a monthly contact with the students, 2. self-esteem data collection, 3. devise an exit interviews, 4. devise a spring interview and collection plan, 5. devise a grade information sheet and collect data on grades and attendance from the counselors in schools, 6. bring students back for a retreat and 7. gather stay-in school statistics.

This report is the culmination of all of the Arkansas Y.O.U. Follow-up projects. Because of the intense relationship that has developed between the Y.O.U. students and their institutions, each university maintained contact with its own Y.O.U. program graduation. Henderson State University had the responsibility to coordinate each university effort, as well as collects and reports the data. Thus, this report is made possible through the efforts of all the Y.O.U. Follow-up personnel throughout the State of Arkansas.

As the Follow-up progressed, it was discovered that although the above objectives were important to determine the success and accountability of the Y.O.U. program, the Follow-up served an even more important role. Because of the emphasis on monthly student contacts, the Follow-up had become not just a research vehicle, but a life-line for many of the Y.O.U. students. This aspect of the Follow-up has become so important that the Arkansas Y.O.U. leaders are trying to find other funds available to extend the Follow-up effort on a permanent basis.

Monthly Contact

Monthly contacts are an essential part of the Y.O.U. Follow-up, as is seen in the program commentaries. This is one of the most time-consuming aspects of the Follow-up project. Because our students move often, keeping track of where they are living can become very difficult. To avoid losing contact with our students, we keep in touch with them monthly. This contact has been in the form of newsletters, birthday cards, holiday cards, phone calls, visits, interviews, etc.

We have been very fortunate that the persons involved in maintaining the monthly contact have been diligent in their duties. Many times numerous phone calls were needed to locate a student. Often students do not have telephones in their homes and arrangements had to be made to contact them through their schools, neighbors, friends, or relatives.

This diligence has paid off, however. Of the 1988 students, the Y.O.U. Follow-up has current addresses on all students. Of the 1989 students, 3 are out of contact with the Y.O.U. Follow-up, and of the 1990 students 7 are out of contact. We have lost contact with only 10 students. This is out of a total of 518. The Follow-up personnel at each university are currently continuing to try and locate these students. **It is important to note that the information in this report is based on a 98% return rate.**

High School Personality Questionnaire Results (HSPQ)

To determine self-esteem attitude changes, we used the Junior-Senior High School Personality Questionnaire. The areas measured in this questionnaire were cool or warm personalities, concrete or abstract thinking, emotional or emotionally calm, phlegmatic or excitable, submissive or dominant, sober or cheerful, expedient or conforming, shy or bold, tough or tender minded, vigorous or withdrawn, self assured or apprehensive, group-oriented or self-sufficient, undisciplined or self-disciplined, and relaxed or tense.

Students entering the Y.O.U. program filled out the inventory during their first week on each campus. They were then given the post-test seven weeks later during the last week of the Y.O.U. program. The results from each graduating group are profiled in Appendix C. As can be derived from the profiles, upon entering the Y.O.U. program, the students tested in the extreme ranges for the measured areas. At the completion of the program, the results of the post-test demonstrated scores in the normal range.

During the retreat in 1989 and 1990, the students were again tested using the HSPQ Inventory. The results of the questionnaire illustrate that the students tested again in the normal range. Therefore, it highly suggests that the self-esteem of the Y.O.U. graduates remained stable over this two year time span.

Exit Interviews

At the end of each Y.O.U. program an exit interview (see Appendix D) was administered to the students. Whenever possible we had the persons who would be doing the Follow-up administer the interview. This increased the student familiarity with the Follow-up. Students were asked questions to determine their attitude about the Y.O.U. program and what they felt was their growth from the program. Of primary interest were the answers to question 14 "What changes have occurred for you during the Y.O.U. program?" and question 15 "What final statement would you like to make (about Y.O.U.)?"

The response to the exit interviews were generally very positive and favorable. Most of the students felt that the Y.O.U. program had been a very positive experience for them. Comments such as "it's going to help me have a better attitude about things," "I study better than before," "I'd like to return," and "I get along better with others" were very common responses.

Counselor, Parent, and Student Spring Interviews

During the spring of each year, the school counselors were asked to interview the parents, siblings, and students who graduated from the Y.O.U. programs. They also completed a self-interview. The counselors were offered a $10.00 stipend for their time and efforts in conducting each set of interviews.

The return on our spring interview was disappointing. We had a very limited return on these interviews. The first year (1989) we had approximately a 50% return rate; the second year (1990) we had approximately 20% return rate; and the third year (1991) approximately 10% return rate. Reasons for this poor return vary, some counselors chose not to participate; others had difficulty reaching the participants' families. Of the interviews that were received though the responses to the questions were similar to those in the exit interviews. The students had maintained a very positive attitude about the program and expressed their intention to complete high school.

Because of the diminishing participation and the low number of interview returns, this is a part of the future Follow-up efforts that will not be recommended for continuation. A possible mail out questionnaire with a reward for its return might be considered.

Grades and Attendance

Grades and attendance were requested from the counselors at the Y.O.U. students' respective schools on a quarterly basis. Table 1 (below) represents an average of the grade point averages (GPAs) of Y.O.U. students from each participating school by year that attended the Y.O.U. program. Also listed is a comparison of the GPAs of the year prior to their attendance in the Y.O.U. program. As can be noted by Table 1, there appear to be no significant increases or decreases in grade point averages.

TABLE 1
Grades*

School Year	1987-88	1988-89	1989-90	1990-91
	(PreYOU)	(1st year post)	(2nd year post)	(3rd year post)
1988 Group	2.76	3.23	2.65	2.70
		(PreYOU)	(1st year post)	(2nd year post)
1989 Group	----	2.28	2.19	2.30
			(PreYOU)	(1st year post
1990 Group	----	----	2.12	2.34

Data was also collected regarding the students' school attendance. Although there was a slight improvement in attendance, as can be noted in Table 2, there were no significant attendance changes. Basically, students maintained a stable attendance rate.

TABLE 2
Attendance*

School Year	1987-88	1988-89	1989-90	1990-91
	(PreYOU)	(1st year post)	(2nd year post)	(3rd year post)
1988 Group	2.76	3.23	2.65	2.70
	(PreYOU)	(1st year post)	(2nd year post)	
1989 Group	----	3.01	2.91	2.74
	(PreYOU)	(1st year post		
1990 Group	----	----	2.82	2.65

* Absences are reported in average days absent annually. A large number of the students had 0 days absent per report.

Retreat

As another part of the Follow-up, the graduates from the various Y.O.U. programs were invited back for a two-day retreat at their university campuses. Expenses were paid through the Follow-up monies.

The Y.O.U. staff transported the students to and from their hometowns and the campus. During the retreats, activities included dances, breakfasts, cookouts, and "rap" sessions in the dorms. On some campuses, the students participated in work seminars.

This was an opportunity for some campuses to retest the students using the H.S.P.Q. Inventory. As noted on page 4, the positive self-esteem measures continued.

The retreat was very successful, but expensive. The transportation and food cost may make the retreat prohibitive for persons trying to duplicate the project. It is also recommended that if one should attempt the retreat aspect of the Follow-up, only the last graduating class should be invited back. On one campus three groups were included and the age span caused some problems.

Stay-In Statistics

As mentioned earlier, the primary objective of the Y.O.U. Follow-up Program was to determine how many of the students who graduated from the Y.O.U. program stayed in school and graduated from high school. The stay in rates are reported per year, combining the results from each campus.

Of the 42 students who graduated from the 1988 program, 19 graduated from high school, 4 received General Education Diplomas (GEDs), 12 are in high school, 1 has died, 6 are not in school at this time, and the Follow-up has not lost contact with any 1988 students.

In 1989, 169 students graduated from the Arkansas Y.O.U. programs. From that group 1 has received a GED, 153 are still in school, 1 has died, and 11 are not in school at this time. We have lost contact with only 3 of the 1989 students.

In 1990, 306 students graduated from the Arkansas Y.O.U. program. From that group 291 are still in school and 8 are not in school at this time. We have lost contact with only 7 of the 1990 students.

Of the 517 students who have graduated from the Y.O.U. programs during the 1988, 1989, and 1990 years, 19 have graduated, 5 have received GED's, 458 are still in school, 2 died, and 25 are not in school at the time. We have lost contact with only 10 students as of this report.

Projects

One of the exciting aspects of research is the use of the information. We have been pleased that the Follow-up research data has been used in a number of papers, projects, and presentations.

As of June 1991, four masters thesis using the Y.O.U. Follow-up data have been proposed. Two persons interested in possibly doing doctoral dissertation have proposed using the data. Results from the follow-up have been presented at many local, state, national, and international meetings. The following are some of the organizations for which the Follow-up personnel have presented information about the program.

American Council on Rural Special Education
Arkansas Association for Counseling and Guidance Development
Association of Teacher Educators
Council for Exceptional Children
International Reading Association
International Special Education Conference
National Rural and Small School Consortium
National Speech Communication Association

XI. Conclusion

The purpose of the Follow-up is multifaceted in nature. The primary responsibility was to collect statistical information to determine if the students who completed the Y.O.U. program graduate from high school. It is the basic data used to prove the accountability of the Y.O.U. program as a drop-out prevention program. As can be noted, a 93% overall stay-in rate definitely can be seen as successful.

It was decided that in addition to the primary responsibility of collecting graduation statistics of the Y.O.U. participants, the Y.O.U. Follow-up should broaden the research to include secondary interests such as attitude, self-esteem, grades, and attendance. The grades and attendance remained stable. The self-esteem and attitudes improved and maintained positive increases.

As the data collection began, it was discovered that although primary and secondary research interests were important, the research efforts became not just a data collection effort, but a very important lifeline for the Y.O.U. students.

The Youth Opportunities Unlimited Follow-up has helped to prove the accountability of the Y.O.U. dropout prevention program, but it is also an important part of that program. We strongly endorse the continuance of the Y.O.U. program with the Follow-up component.

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